

DRY AND WET GENERATIONS: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A POPULATION TURNS AROUND ON DRINKING?

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Introduction and Aims: Drinking has declined in the last decade among young Australians, and also elsewhere. Historical instances of “dry” and “wet” generations are analysed to illuminate what may happen next, in terms of behaviour, problems and policy implications.

Method / Approach: Historical instances and age-period-cohort analyses of generational shifts up and down are drawn on in terms of key findings on potential trajectories in the shorter and longer term.

Key Findings: There have been broadly parallel movements up and down in drinking with about 80-year cycles in societies with a strong temperance tradition. Generational changes in drinking levels are often reacting against the dominant cultural politics of alcohol for a previous generation. Changes when a generation is 16-25 hold implications for the generation’s drinking trajectory in middle age. In “drying” periods, there is increasing attention to problems from drinking, and lower thresholds of concern may contribute to “trouble per litre” apparently rising. Models of change vary with the society’s political structure and politics of alcohol, including changes which are impelled from the bottom-up, from the top-down, and by general societal changes.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications for Policy: There are lessons for a public health approach to alcohol to be learned cross-culturally and from history. Increased concern about problems from drinking in a drying period make public health-oriented policy moves more acceptable and politically more attainable. The challenge for public health then is to avoid pushing beyond politico-cultural limits and providing too easy a target for a new generational reaction.

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